

Sandwell MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
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Date of last inspection	15/11/2005

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The adoption service of the Metropolitan Borough Council of Sandwell is part of the local authority's Child Care Division, which is part of Education and Children's Services. The adoption service is provided through the Family Placement Service based at Crystal House in Smethwick. The nominated manager for the adoption service is the service manager with responsibility for fostering and adoption. The adoption team, including the adoption support team is managed by the adoption team manager. There are seven social workers in the adoption team and one senior practitioner. The adoption support team has a senior practitioner, one social worker, a community support worker and a business support officer.

The work of the adoption service is to provide placements for Sandwell children in need of adoptive families. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports approved adopters. It manages and supports a Letterbox system for post adoption contact, undertakes work with inter-country adoptions, section 55 counselling and family finding for children needing adoptive placements. Adoption support is assessed and links provided to local groups and direct work, including intermediary services. Sandwell adoption service is part of the Black Country Consortium, which has formed Adoption in the Black Country (ABC). This consortium of the neighbouring authorities of Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley work closely together on adoption issues. They jointly fund a recruitment officer and offer preparation training to prospective adopters in the consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

This inspection was undertaken by two adoption inspectors over four days, with an additional day for the observation of the panel. During the inspection staff were interviewed, including adoption social workers, administrative staff, child care social workers, the managers of the service and the councillor with lead responsibility for children services, a group of independent reviewing officers, the panel chair and the agency decision maker. Three adoptive families were interviewed in their own homes and one came into the Crystal House office.

For this particular inspection it was not possible to send out the pre-inspection material including surveys to the service. However, Sandwell Adoption Service agreed for the inspection to take place whilst recognising the surveys would not be available on this occasion.

Improvements since the last inspection

The appointment of new nominated and team managers has given a sense of progress and renewed focused on aspects of the service that need to be improved. There was an awareness by managers of an number of the issues raised during the inspection and a strong commitment from the director down to team manger to ensure that appropriate changes happen.

Progress has been made in the completion of a statement of purpose, although further revision is still needed.

The children's guide for older children has been completed.

There is now a protocol for the use of both medical and legal advisors.

The functioning of the adoption support team was a positive aspect of this service. Although there is a need to review the number of staff in this team and within the service as a whole, there was some effective and sensitive work undertaken by them. The Letterbox system has been strengthened since the last inspection with the provision of administrative support and the way in which it operates. The attitude and approach of the workers was an example of good practice within the service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The joint recruitment work with the Adoption in the Black County (ABC) consortium continues to provide a suitable number of prospective adopters for Sandwell. The link between the needs of Sandwell children and prospective adopters needs to be made more clearly, for example in the Statement of Purpose and in information to prospective adopters.

There was an improvement in the information provided for adopters and there are positive plans to extend the range of leaflets provided for adopters at different stages in the adoption process. Matching meetings take place but it was reported that frequently (reference made to three situations this year and another at the end of the previous year) full information is not available at the time of matching. This was often medical information either about the child or the birth parents. Information came to light at panel and there were examples of panel being unable to recommend a match as the prospective adopters had not been given all the information. Other examples were given of the Life Appreciation Day being the occasion when new information became available resulting in the meeting being adjourned. This is too

late in the process for new medical information to be offered that should have been considered as part of the matching information at an early stage.

Information about siblings should be considered in relation to each individual and consideration given to the needs of the individuals and their own timescales in decisions about placing together.

The number of disruption indicates that there is a need to address the matching process and ensure there is a full and accurate exchange of information as early as possible in the process. Assessments of adopters were variable. It was good to note some inclusion of competencies, the use of a Punjabi speaking social worker for assessment of a Punjabi speaking applicant, the seeking of an employer reference for all applicants and contact being made with previous partners. Comment was made by some adopters of the sensitivity of assessing workers. However, the assessments needed to be strengthened with the Health & Safety checklist including weapons and guns. The financial assessment of adopters including funds from abroad. The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) memo must include the level, reference number and the date of disclosure.

The preparation training was seen as informative by the adopters seen. Effort should be made to ensure that delays are minimised and full use is made of training shared with other ABC members.

The Panel is effectively organised and managed and the minutes give a clear and appropriate record of the meetings. The organisation of the panel would be assisted by the establishment of a post of Panel Advisor, without line management responsibility for the work under consideration by the panel. There is a need to strengthen the quality assurance of the panel, both for children's and adopter's reports, which would be supported by the development of the post of Panel Advisor. The decision making process needs to be restated to ensure that all involved are clear that the Agency Decision Maker performs this role. Changes to the wording of the decision maker's letter would assist this clarification. The nominated manager was seen as suitable and staff were suitably appointed to the service. There is a need to ensure that telephone verification of references is undertaken and recorded as part of the appointment process for staff. The draft procedure dealing with situations of abuse of children placed for adoption needs to be reviewed to ensure all children placed for adoption are safeguarded and that it covers situations of historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is inadequate.

The adopters seen felt supported by their social worker and felt that support would be available in the future if they needed it with their child. There was a clear process for referrals from adoptive families seeking support. Evidence was seen of adoption support assessments being completed and support provided by the Adoption Support Team. Use is made of local groups and before adoption the Barnford project is used

and there is access to the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, this service is available to Looked After Children and workers expressed concern that it was not accessible (other than as a member of the general population) after an adoption order is made. This was illustrated by the lack of involvement from Barnford in the adoption support files seen.

There is now a protocol for the use of both medical and legal advisors. There were a number of examples of medical issues not being identified through the adoption medical, these included developmental delay, concerns that were relevant to matching and mental health issues from birth families. Senior managers felt that with a recent change in Medical Advisor the medical information should improve.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There was limited evidence of birth family involvement in adoption plans for children. There was only one example of the birth parent's views being recorded on the Child Placement Report (CPR). The children's social workers talked with understanding and enthusiasm about their work, but this was not reflected in the case work and practice seen during the inspection. Independent support is available to birth families and local support was identified in leaflets provided for them.

The evidence about maintaining children's heritage was mixed. There were some examples of effective work with children in preparing them for adoption and in understanding their situation, including some well presented life story books. There was also evidence of this work not taking place and adopters commented they had to wait months for life story books, one for six months. The Letterbox exchange system was very well organised with reminders in advance, copies of all exchanges, support for parents in writing letters, including example letters and follow up when a planned exchange did not take place. The workers in the Adoption Support team were impressive. They were non-judgemental, sensitive and empathic. They make contact with birth parents two weeks after child placed and before any exchange has started, to let them know how the child has settled. It was the social worker in this team who chaired Life Appreciation Days and identified a number of matching issues not previously addressed. The Life Appreciation Days were well established and were used effectively to pass on information about the child to the adopters. Adopters were aware of the significance of children's heritage and there were examples of memory boxes being used.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

There was recognition from the inspectors that there had been recent changes in the nominated manager, the adoption team manager and in senior managers. The impact of these changes has not yet had an effect on the evidence available for the inspection. There had been little progress on the last action plan until the current team manager instigated work two - three months prior to the inspection. The current nominated manager is skilled, knowledgeable and experienced in adoption work and has identified issues that need to be addressed in the service. There is a need for further revision of the statement of purpose and the work on the children's guide needs to be finalised. The information provided for adopters has improved but the leaflets need to extend to cover every aspect of the process for prospective adopters.

There were a number of areas of weakness in the organisation and management of the adoption service and children's services overall. Serious delays were evident in planning for children. On the files seen there was a situation where a four year old child had just been matched with adopters after having an adoption plan since he was nine months old. There were examples of relinquished babies waiting to be placed, with delays in presentation to panel, matching and placement.

Communication remains problematic. Comments were made by adopters that the "internal communication in Sandwell is very poor". In one of the cases presented to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) part of the criticism of the service by the IRM was "there appears to have been a lack of communication between the two workers involved".

Paperwork has been lost, including applications by adopters and a file (one referred to the IRM).

Staff saw supervision as helpful and appreciated regular supervision times and support from colleagues in the team. There is a concern about the quality of supervision reflected in the work presented to the IRM.

Children's social workers talked of parallel or concurrent planning but there was no evidence of this taking place. While believing they undertook this practice a social worker also said " we can't do anything about adoption until it's been to Adoption Panel."

There are systems in place to monitor work and evidence on files of managers signing case notes and auditing the files. However, the correction recommended had not taken place on the files.

Staff saw Sandwell as a fair and competent employer despite having had a number of changes and re-organisations. The developments within the Adoption Support Team were positive. The way the Letterbox exchanges take place has been commented on earlier as effective and sensitive. The number of staff is relevant to delays within the systems and the number of staff involved in adoption support work will need revision to reflect the increase in the identified need for this work.

The case records were not well ordered and were difficult to access, although the adopter's files were more accessible than the children's files. The grammar and spelling was poor in the majority of the files seen, which in some cases was so poor as to lose the sense of the report. Confidentiality was not observed on files where the panel minutes included on the file had the preceding or following item's minute as well as that of the subject of the file. The personnel files were seen by the fostering inspector to have improved. There remains the need to record and undertake telephone verification of references for new applicants. The files held on sessional staff need to include proof of identity. The premises used by the adoption service are suitable for the purposes of the service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
4	provide full and accurate information consistently recorded on all prospective adopters. The record of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check must show the level, date of disclosure, and reference number. The Health and Safety check list must include weapons and specify guns	01/06/2007
1	finalise their Child Protection procedures making it clear they relate to any situation of possible abuse of children placed for adoption. These procedures must include guidance about allegations of historical abuse. NMS 32 LAA REgs 2003 [Arrangements for the protection of children.]	01/06/2007
2	ensure that full and accurate information is available in relation to each child being considered for adoption. This must include information about the child's health and the health of their birth family NMS 18 [AA Regs. 2005 (15)]	01/06/2007
25	ensure the contents of the child's case record and the prospective adopter's case record are treated as confidential AA Regs 2005 [14]	31/07/2007
28	include proof of identity, including a recent photograph on their personnel files. This includes those files held on sessional staff	31/07/2007
25	provide information about how the archive of adoption records is recorded, where and how it is stored and how it is accessed must be provided to Ofsted within the identified timescale.	09/07/2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- identify information about the needs of Sandwell children waiting for adoption and include this in information for prospective adopters, which will also assist the ABC recruitment officer (National Minimum Standard 3)
- address delays in the early stages of prospective adopters approaching Sandwell (National Minimum Standards 2)
- notify the workers involved of decisions made about adopters and children as soon as possible. The Agency's Decision should be made within seven days of the panel and the letter of notification should make it clear who has made the decision (National Minimum Standards 13)
- verify references by telephone in relation to each member of staff and maintain a record of this check (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure the position of panel advisor is held by a senior member of staff who does not hold line management responsibility for the work being presented to panel (National Minimum Standard 20)
- revise the statement of purpose to give clear and concise information about the service. The children's guide for younger children should be finalised (National Minimum Standard 1)
- use file audits effectively to monitor recording, undertake any amendments taken and check as part of the monitoring process. (National Minimum Standards 17)